

Critical Thinking in Literary Studies: Stimulating Learner Autonomy

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Warm Up Discussion Questions:

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?

- Students study literature to find out what the author meant.
- Students study literature because it is of high cultural and moral value.
- Students study literature as a way of interpreting history, culture, and human existence.

Traditional methods of literary analysis:

- Traditional analysis was largely born in the UK and Us in 1930's and 40's. Intellectual forerunners of the time believed that texts had a meaning placed there by the author. Historical and intellectual context were not considered important. Literature was considered a special art form with moral and civilizing value. Works worthy of the label "literature" were admitted into the canon. The first two assumptions above belong to traditional methods.

Student Autonomy:

- Students should be encouraged to question these traditional methods and their assumptions. What is literature? What is its purpose? Why do we study literature? Why are some books canonized and others not? How can we interpret texts?
- Students should be trained to respond to the text with their own ideas. They should be free to agree or disagree with the author, the teacher, and other critics.
- Students should be made aware of the biases of their own position. This can be achieved through training to take on multiple viewpoints or ways of reading.

Newer methods of literary analysis:

- Newer methods of analysis tend towards the last assumption on the list of opening discussion questions.
- Literary studies have moved away from traditional methods and embraced theory. How can students with English as a second language be introduced to these often dense and abstract concepts?
- Students can be introduced to the concept of multiple ways of reading through something as simple as interpreting "Jack and Jill" from different focal points, ie. : What happens when you look at this in terms of work/labor? What happens when you look at this in terms of gender? What happens when you look at this in terms of how it affects the reader- does it matter if you've heard it a million times, as compared to if you'd never heard it?
- Newer methods tend to move away from "what the author meant." Instead, the reader can be the focus of meaning-making, or the intellectual/ historical/ cultural context is the focus. Instead of just staying IN the text and analyzing the text, many newer methods use the text as a way to analyze the CONTEXT- culture, language, time, meaning (or lack of meaning), humanity, politics, the world, etc.

Conclusions:

To be able to read critically implies:

- To be able to unpack the biases in one's own reading stemming from one's own experiences, and socio-cultural position.
- To be able to apply critical theories, such as feminism, Marxist literary theory, or post-structuralist theories to literary texts.
- To be able to identify and question the assumptions of the text at all levels.

Suggested Further Reading:

- For an informative guide (written for students but also useful for teachers) on how the subject of English has moved beyond traditional methods, see Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students by Robert Eaglestone. Routledge: London, 2000.
- For suggestions on introducing critical theory concepts in the classroom, see the "Teaching Theory" chapter of Teaching Literature by Elaine Showalter. The book has a website at : <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/Showalter/Default.htm>
- For a good introduction to critical theory concepts themselves, see Dino Felluga's "Introductory Guide to Critical Theory" available online at: <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/>
- A brief, general outline of literary theories (*to be read critically!*) can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_theory
- "Five Ways of Reading." This article from the University of Colorado is a simplified introduction to some critical theories, which I have used with my students: <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/E140/FiveWays.cfm>
- For a wealth of resources on teaching and learning, see the "NYU Center for Teaching Excellence" online at: <http://www.nyu.edu/cte/Resources.html>

Especially note their [Student Motivation and Critical Thinking](#) section.